

**Viral Meningitis**

(meningitis)

What is viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis is an infection of the meninges (a thin lining covering the brain and spinal cord) caused by any one of a number of different viruses. It is a fairly common disease. Almost all of the cases occur as single, isolated events. However, occasional outbreaks do occur.

Who is at risk for viral meningitis?

Anyone can get viral meningitis, but it occurs most often in children.

What are the symptoms of viral meningitis?

The symptoms may include fever, headache, stiff neck and fatigue. Rash, sore throat and intestinal symptoms also may occur.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms generally appear within one week of exposure.

How is viral meningitis spread?

Because a number of different viruses are capable of causing viral meningitis, the manner in which the virus is spread depends upon the type of virus involved. Some are spread by direct or indirect contact with fecal material or possibly respiratory secretions from an infected person. Others are spread by mosquitoes.

When and for how long is a person able to spread the disease?

Some of the viruses that cause viral meningitis are contagious, while others, such as those carried by mosquitoes, cannot be spread from person to person. Fortunately, most people exposed to these viruses experience mild or no symptoms. Most people are exposed to these viruses at some time in their lives, but few actually develop meningitis.

How is a person diagnosed?

Consult a health-care professional for a positive diagnosis.

What is the treatment?

No specific treatment for viral meningitis exists at this time, and antibiotics will not work against viruses. Most patients completely recover on their own. Doctors often will recommend bed rest, plenty of fluids and medicine to relieve fever and headache.

Does past infection make a person immune?

This may depend on the virus. Many people may be infected with the virus and not experience symptoms, but they are still at a risk of getting sick, while other viruses may cause a person to build up immunity.

Should children or others be excluded from day care, school, work or other activities if they have viral meningitis?

No. Since most cases are due to viruses that may be passed in the stool and possibly through respiratory secretions, people diagnosed with viral meningitis should be instructed to thoroughly wash their hands after using the toilet or blowing their noses. However, in certain situations, it may become necessary for children in daycare that have diarrhea to be kept home until diarrhea stops.

As a general rule of thumb, infected people should always cover coughs and sneezes.

What can be done to prevent the spread of viral meningitis disease?

Because most people who are infected with viruses that cause meningitis do not become sick, it can be difficult to prevent the spread of the virus. However, practicing good personal hygiene can help reduce your chances of becoming infected. If you are in contact with someone who has viral meningitis, the most effective method of prevention is to wash your hands thoroughly and often. Also, cleaning contaminated surfaces and soiled articles first with soap and water and then disinfecting them with a dilute solution of chlorine-containing bleach (made by mixing approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of bleach with 1 gallon of water) can be a very effective way to inactivate the virus, especially in institutional settings such as child-care centers.

Additional Information:

Additional information is available by calling the North Dakota Department of Health at 800.472.2180.

Resource: American Academy of Pediatrics. In: Pickering LK, ed. *Red Book: 2003 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases*. 26th ed. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2003:[123-129]